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ABSTRACT

The experience of three unnamed Rhode Island communities in using the Local Planning and Assessment Process (LPAP) are described. Community A had conducted a needs assessment survey and wished technical assistance to validate the perceived needs and to develop evaluation skills in a core group of their faculty. However, the process has temporarily stopped and several reasons are given to explain this. Community B used the technical assistance of two consultants in an advisory capacity to the central office and to the Needs Assessment Committee. Four reasons are suggested to account for the continuing success of this project. Community C entered the LPAP after conducting its own local needs assessment and validating the perceived needs. The area of language arts had been selected as a program area to be revised. Technical assistance provided to Community C included workshops on evaluation techniques and the formative use of evaluation data. Three reasons are suggested for the success of this project. (Author/CTM)

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Providing Technical Assistance:

LPAP's Use with An Existing Curriculum

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The Local Planning and Assessment Process (LPAP) is by its very nature well defined yet flexible to the programmatic needs and characteristics of the local school districts in Rhode Island. This paper includes an examination of that process through the eyes of persons who have provided technical assistance to three districts.

The purpose of this paper is to examine LPAP in relationship to the real world in which it is implemented. The outcome of this examination is the identification of some key elements that appear to be related to successful implementation of the process in the districts described.

Technical assistance in using LPAP was provided to three communities in Rhode Island. In two communities technical assistance was provided as the districts entered the needs validation phase of LPAP. The responses to needs assessment surveys in these two communities indicated perceived needs in the areas of basic skills and school climate. The third community had already identified one curriculum area, language arts, which they wanted to improve through review and curriculum development.

Community A adopted LPAP from step one and had successfully established a philosophy and goals as well as conducted a needs assessment survey. The local district had two purposes for requesting technical assistance:

(1) They wanted assistance in developing a plan to validate the perceived needs.

(2) They wanted a core group of their faculty and administration to develop evaluation skills.

The Needs Validation Committee for Community A consisted of two central office personnel, several principals and teachers. A few persons from the committee had served on the needs assessment survey committee.

Community A had consistently used study groups and task forces to examine various curriculum and programmatic areas. At the time of the needs validation, several study committees were examining basic skills, gifted and talented, and student progress reporting to parents. The Needs Validation Committee agreed to performance criteria that incorporated the use of data being collected by these other study groups. A plan for validating the perceived needs was developed with the technical assistance consultants. The plan included a definition of the tasks, timelines and persons responsible. But the process has temporarily stopped. The following factors appear to have contributed to this disruption:

(1) The perceived needs of the district were widely publicized throughout the community before they were validated. This caused some defensiveness among teachers and particularly committee members.

(2) The central office person in charge of the process has very limited skills in the areas of program evaluation.

(3) The Needs Validation Committee does not appear to be particularly interested in investing the time in developing skills in program evaluation and review.

(4) The superintendent was asked to resign.

Community B also adopted the LPAP from step one. The district requested the technical assistance of two consultants during the needs validation phase. The consultants were utilized in an advisory capacity to both the central office person in charge of the process and the Needs Assessment Committee which included the district-wide curriculum committee, community members, and students. This committee served as the needs assessment survey and validation committee. The district-wide curriculum

committee was responsible for program reviews such as LPAP and for establishing priorities for in-service and summer curriculum workshops. As in Community A, Community B relied to a great extent on existing data sources (i.e., achievement test data, a high school follow-up study, data on school vandalism and student dismissals). Additional information necessary to validate the perceived needs will come from a student survey and a staff survey.

The plan for validating the perceived needs appears to be operating smoothly. Performance criteria were rapidly agreed upon and existing or new data sources identified. In other words, the process appears to be working. Some factors that characterize Community B and may be contributing to the success of the process include the following:

(1) The perceived needs of the district based on the Needs Assessment survey will not be publicized until the needs are validated and a list of priority needs are ready for recommendation.

(2) The district-wide curriculum committee has had consistent practice at functioning in an advisory capacity to the central office and values the inclusion of members of the community and student body in their task.

(3) Several central office personnel, in particular the person in charge of the LPAP process, have some basic skills in program evaluation and review.

(4) All work for the needs validation is being centrally coordinated and in most instances conducted by the central office person in charge of curriculum.

Community C entered the LPAP after conducting its own local needs assessment and validating the perceived needs. As mentioned earlier the area of language arts was selected as a program area to be revised.

The technical assistance provided to Community C included workshops on general evaluation techniques and the formative use of evaluation data. Technical assistants worked with a committee consisting of two central office personnel, several elementary teachers, and two administrators.

Community C had already made one attempt to implement a new language arts curriculum but failed because of lack of teacher-teacher communication and proper in-service training. During the period that the committee worked with the technical assistant consultants, they obtained direct feedback from staff regarding the new language arts curriculum and developed a plan that ultimately led to the revision of the curriculum, proper in-service training, and on-going evaluation.

Similar factors that contributed to the success of the LPAP process in Community B are also present in Community C. These factors include:

(1) The use of an ongoing district-wide curriculum development committee.

(2) Strong coordination of curriculum development and evaluation at the central office level. The central office person has a particularly strong curriculum and evaluation background.

(3) Strong district-wide commitment to a coordinated curriculum.

Summary

The LPAP manual stresses that LPAP is meant to become a central process by which a school district ultimately operates, and it is seen as a way of integrating a variety of planning and assessment activities so that, in some districts, some reorganizing or resequencing of activities may be needed.

This study is limited in scope and would be enhanced by the examination of more communities with sophisticated data collection procedures. However, given the present types of technical assistance provided through LPAP, the following factors seem to be possible prerequisites for its successful implementation.

(1) A long-established, well-coordinated and centrally located curriculum development function for which a central office administrator assumes the major responsibility.

(2) A clearly defined task for any committees or people that assume a role in the LPAP that does not place an undue burden or expectation on the committee.

(3) The development of a clearly defined plan that creates a sense of direction for the process.

(4) The coordinated use of existing data sources such as achievement test data, other task force reports, or district-wide data gathered for standard reporting (ex., vandalism, suspension).

The above criteria were present in the two communities that seem to be successfully utilizing the technical assistance to proceed through the LPAP. Several of the mentioned above factors are not present in Community A where the process has temporarily broken down.

Examination ot the use of LPAP in the three communities suggests some possible revisions in the process of providing technical assistance. These revisions might include:

(1) More extensive administrator in-service in program evaluation and review.

(2) The identification of one committee that will remain intact for at least the entire needs assessment phase. This concept might be expanded to the concept of a steering committee to oversee the entire LPAP process.

(3) A clear definition of the tasks and expectations of the committee so that an undue burden is not placed on persons unwilling and/or incapable of becoming program evaluators overnight.